

Consumer Satisfaction Drops with VA Mental Health Hospital Care

Recently discharged VA mental health inpatients reported less satisfaction with their care over the six year period between 1995-2001. In a study by VISN 1 MIRECC researchers, patient's post-discharge ratings declined in 7 areas and showed no change in 9 others. Areas showing greatest declines included coordination of care, information sharing, attention to patient preferences and global satisfaction. This time period corresponds with massive changes in VA mental health care with a 58% decrease in occupied mental health inpatient beds and a 27% increase in number of veterans treated in outpatient mental health programs. Fewer patients were hospitalized and length of hospital stay declined. While a number of studies have shown that these changes in the VA mental health system have not had a negative impact on general treatment outcomes, this survey is the first to evaluate consumer satisfaction for this decreasing group of inpatients. This same time period was associated with many changes in the types of mental health inpatients with increased proportions of patients with drug abuse, combined drug abuse and mental illness, bipolar illness and psychotic depression. These groups of patients tended to be less satisfied with their care. Over this same period fewer inpatients were diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder and schizophrenia. Patients with these disorders tended to be more satisfied with their care. These findings suggest the need to modify inpatient treatment programs in response to the needs of a changing population of veterans with mental illness. The researchers, Greg Greenberg and Robert Rosenheck, note that consumer satisfaction is only one of many indicators of health care quality and the current study findings should be balanced with other reports that fail to show a negative impact of cutbacks in VA mental health inpatient services.